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**SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke**

Earliest memories of my maternal grandfather's ranch were the big rattlesnakes found under the houses and around the barns. The abundance of chickens and the attraction of a wet weather spring, plus the large brown rats propagating in the prickly pear cactus were blamed for attracting them. However, after the chickens were gone and the spring dried up and the cactus was brought under control, we continued to flush out big rattlers under the saddle shed and about anywhere grass and weeds grew tall enough to afford concealment.

Rare was a work finished in the warm seasons without a stirring calamity in which one of us walked up on a fearsome size snake, making the rest of the day a snake hunt instead of a livestock gathering.

Profiling the production on the place from my grandfather's skimpy records to present times show the lamb and calf and wool weights below other places where we pasture stock. New drenches and better feeding practices helped some, but the outfit still failed to show much improvement.

Still, we kept finding the big snakes. This spring hasn't been an exception. Two weeks ago during a cow work over there, a big one crawled out from under a ledge and

caused a couple of boys on horseback to nearly get bucked off.

I'd disclose how big it was, but less than a week before then I'd told a couple of auction hands at a party in San Angelo about those snakes, and they'd hurt my feelings so bad laughing that dimensions are a sore subject.

But I can tell you we are beginning to gain around the rib eye area. They aren't as stretchy as the rat snake I once let get away up at the headquarters that was estimated to be over 19 feet long. Still, those old boogers over at grandpa's ranch are a long, long ways from being dwarfy. It's just unfortunate those auction fellows work in such small corrals and narrow alleys they can judge weight better than distance.

Two of the stores in Mertzon have advertisements offering to buy live snakes. Forty years, at least, have passed since a livestock buyer's card was on one of the bulletin boards.

As fast as rattlers mature there, reptile farming might be the best game. Trimmed up and shortened, the skins would make good scabbards for long barreled shotguns.

If I ever see the rat snake again, I'm not going to try to bring him in alive like the last time. I'm going to capture him on film.